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EPISCOPAL COLLEGE FORUM AIRS RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

GENEVA, N. Y. -- A recent symposium at Hobart and William Smith Colleges here on "Religion, Politics, and the New American Morality," brought together representatives of liberal and conservative viewpoints.

Cal Thomas, vice president for communications for the Moral Majority, and Phyllis Schlafly, director of the Eagle Forum of the Stop ERA movement, clashed with former Senator Dick Clark, an early victim of "target voting" by the New Right, and the Rev. Richard Neuhaus, former editor of Worldview magazine. Also presenting papers were Dr. Julius Lester, professor of Afro-American studies at the University of Massachusetts; Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, national inter-religious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee; and the Rev. Carter Heyward, assistant professor of theology, Episcopal Divinity School.

Speaking to a full house in a large auditorium at the yoked Episcopal colleges, Schlafly addressed the proposition, "Do You Want a Gender Free Society?" Citing feminist speakers, she observed, "I believe from debating them, from listening to them, and from reading their writing that, as a general principle, they do."

Thomas spoke to the goals and objectives of the Moral Majority and spent a major portion of his presentation "trying to catch up with the half-truths and the deliberate distortions of what the Moral Majority does and doesn't stand for or endorse."

Perhaps the major purpose of the symposium was the illustration of the widening gulf between liberal and conservative spokesmen today.

Lester, whose presentation argued for a separation of the "sacred" from the "moral," summed up his experiences throughout the three-day event, "I am afraid, very afraid. The libertarian fabric is endangered by those who can no longer stand to deal with or endure the complexities of freedom. . . . When they call for a return to a Christian republic, let them remember that it was the Christian churches who tolerated and approved of the slavery that is my heritage."

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Clark noted, "It's high time we realized that the New Right has a lot to teach liberals. They beat liberals at their own game; they are organized and they have the financial support and the manpower to be around for a long time." He added, "There will be more liberals who are targeted for defeat in the next election; the outlook is bleak, but not without the possibility of being reversed."

The clash between liberals recently thrown out of power and conservatives new to power seemed to run through the presentations and the question periods. Both Schafly and Thomas charged liberals with denying conservatives the right to debate their views. Schafly noted, "The feminist movement doesn't want us to have an equal say; their position is that there is no 'other side' to their demands, period."

Thomas seemed to indicate that there should be room for dialogue. "Contrary to the way liberals have always treated us, we don't seek to eradicate them; we want to share with them and learn with them, but we also want to teach them and share with them, too."

Speaking to the religious perspectives in a changing American morality, Tanenbaum pleaded against preoccupation with talking about morality and not translating words into action. "The starvation of 800 million in Africa and Asia seems to make hunger an issue on a world scale that makes the problems we're addressing seem trivial." He added, "I worry what the world is going to be like in the next generation, when the children born retarded to starving families around the world grow to adulthood. The challenge of the '80s is to open our eyes to the plight of all people the world over and to act on it with a sense of compassion and responsibility."

Heyward called for toleration between competing ideologies and the creation of a "truly pluralistic society, where people have a chance to order their own lives without coercion by any group."

Speaking as a feminist, Heyward urged "that all sisters reachout towards that ideal world of toleration and worthiness. The struggle to be must continue until the time truly comes when all people are equal and all people are loved."

Neuhaus spoke of "the game of defining the shape to be of the America that we all -- regardless of our persuasions -- love." "We are witnessing the collapse of the 200-year hegemony of the enlightened spirit. We cannot simply continue to 'muddle through.' "

Characterizing the current scene, he suggested, "We are a society adrift; that is where we are." Neuhaus argued for an understanding of the religio-political nature of the New Right and urged greater understanding. "Dr. Martin Luther King told us, 'Whom you would change, you must first love;' that seems like a good place for us to start a dialogue."

